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**Paper Bullets of the Brain**

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# **Paper Bullets of the Brain**

by

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**Report**

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**For Abu and Papa**

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The University of Texas, 2010

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction.....                         | 1  |
| 2. Background.....                           | 3  |
| 3. The Facebook Study.....                   | 11 |
| 4. Theories on Gender and Communication..... | 20 |
| 5. Conclusions.....                          | 31 |
| Bibliography.....                            | 33 |
| Vita.....                                    | 34 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Figure 1: Paris Hilton's Facebook Profile..... | 13 |
| Figure 2: Jokes by Gender.....                 | 17 |
| Figure 3: Insults by Gender.....               | 18 |



## **LIST OF TABLES**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 1: Jokes and Insulting Jokes by number of Occurrences..... | 15 |
| Table 2: Jokes and Insulting Jokes by Percentages.....           | 15 |
| Table 3: Sexual and Homosexual Comments.....                     | 19 |

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedict to Woody Allen's Annie and Alvy, quick tongues and razor wits have been a staple of social interactions between men and women. Joke making, often at another's expense, is prominent in our cultural lexicon, but why do we use disparaging humor in order to bond with others? And to what extent are these generalizations an accurate portrayal of social discourse? Here, we explore social and cultural influences that create our gender identity and influence the way we communicate.

The corpus study in this paper offers a data oriented approach to the discussion of gender contrasts in language. Using the social networking site Facebook as a corpus, I collected 1,500 random samples of interactions between friends. I tracked the use of jokes and disparaging humor between same- and opposite-gender pairs to discover that there is a strong correlation between the style of joke-making evoked by the speaker and the gender of both the speaker and the hearer. The men in the study were about eight times more likely to make insulting or degrading jokes with other men than the women were with each other.

Section 2 offers some background on how humor is used as a politeness strategy, and how to approach a gender-based analysis. The results of the Facebook study are presented in Section 3. Following the study is a discussion where I address methods of politeness across genders, approaches to humor, and how sex, culture, and gender expectations influence our communicative choices. I offer some explanations as to why men are

generally more likely to use degrading humor than women, as well as theories why women use this type of humor more with men than with each other. Though the discussion is based in our linguistic choices, the results of the study reflect trends that are present in countless aspects of society, and the issues that are raised go far beyond the spoken word.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 HUMOR AS A POLITENESS STRATEGY**

The Facebook study, and the types of interactions I wanted to focus on involve creating solidarity and bonding with others. I focused on communications between friends and acquaintances because I wanted to explore how different genders might attempt politeness and forming kinship with others. The nature of the data and the context from which I gathered it (a social networking website) are inherently friendly, as opposed to say, a message board or discussion forum where arguments and antagonistic remarks are frequent. The anonymity of the internet creates a space where users are frequently ignore social niceties because they have no intention of forming any kind of real relationship with the user they are insulting or picking a fight with. A social networking site like Facebook however, creates a space with real life counterparts and consequences. An insult to a friend on Facebook can be confronted in real life. The goal of the site is not to alienate and release aggression, people are there to form relationships, to network, to strengthen the relationships that already exist. Though there are no doubt numerous aspects of communication in which men and women differ their approach (confrontation, argument, etc) this study focuses on a particular method of politeness: the use of humor.

The theoretical framework I use to discuss the issues that arise from the study comes primarily from Brown and Levinson's work on politeness, which hinges on the idea of a persons 'face.' For Brown and Levinson, 'face' is the public self-image that a member of society wishes to claim for themselves. Acts of politeness, generally speaking, are ways

in which we establish and protect our own face, as well as the face of the people we interact with. The desire for preservation of face is termed a 'face want.' An individual's face wants are described in terms of **positive** and **negative face wants**; positive face entails the desire for your wants and needs to be desired by others, negative face is the desire for one's actions to be unimpeded by others. Thus, various methods of politeness can be categorized in terms of the speaker's intention towards the hearer's face wants, either by trying to **address the hearer's desires**, or by trying to **minimize one's imposition**.

Along with acts of politeness that address a person's face wants, Brown and Levinson also distinguish what they call face threatening acts, which run contrary to the wants of the speaker or addressee. In the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, which is present in any interaction, participants seek to preserve face and avoid any face-threatening acts. However, since human beings aren't always rational, many of our actions are face-threatening. A speaker can threaten a hearer's positive face through disapproval, criticism, irreverence, non-cooperation, expression of violent emotions, and can threaten their own positive face through apologies, self-humiliation or confessions. One might threaten another's negative face through demands, orders, threats, or even compliments and expressions of envy, while also threatening their own negative face by making excuses, expressing thanks or accepting offers. The various methods of politeness that people execute are ways of avoiding and minimizing these types of face-threatening acts. Acts of positive politeness are defined in terms of how they might minimize a threat

to someone's positive face. For instance, a token agreement or white lie is a method of positive politeness that minimizes the possibility for disagreement or criticism.

The act of joke making is one of the many methods of positive politeness, and encompasses many other methods within it. Jokes are often based on mutual shared background knowledge and values. It is because of shared knowledge that people are able to make jokes; without agreement, a joke may be interpreted literally. Furthermore, if the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is not based in mutual understanding, jokes may cause rifts or embarrassing situations. For instance, between friends, an exchange like the following would be taken lightly:

- (1) Speaker A: Could I have a glass of water?  
Speaker B: Absolutely not. I'm going to let you die of thirst.

Between strangers, however, this could be seen as antagonistic, because they have no established relationship. In this way, jokes rely heavily on the mutual belief that the speaker and hearer share a cordial, if not friendly relationship. A social bond is implied in the mere act of joke making. The reason the utterance in (1) is regarded as a joke is because of the shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer that the speaker is *not* going to let the hearer die. Speaker A assumes that he and the hearer have the same stance on the issue presented in the joke. By making a joke the speaker is avoiding disagreement and criticism and puts the hearer at ease. Making a joke often presupposes the hearer's wants and attitudes, their familiarity with the speaker, and establishes an in-group dynamic. Joking can also be a way of minimizing the emotional stakes in a conversation, or making light of a bad situation, in order to avoid distress on the part of the hearer.

## 2.2 ANALYZING GENDER

The politeness perspective gives us a great insight into the reasons for many of the choices that a speaker might make during an utterance, however examining discourse along these lines is not without its difficulties. The very act of discourse analysis faces the problem of the variation of both form and function. Holms (1995) writes, “Not only is there an infinite variety of ways of expressing linguistic politeness, it is also the case that the same linguistic devices can express different meanings in different contexts. There is nothing intrinsically polite about any linguistic form.” One utterance could have any number of intentions depending on the speaker. Along these same lines, one particular utterance could encompass more than one meaning at a time, accomplishing several different tasks at once. One issue that will come up time and again is the inherent duality of meaning we will find present in the types of jokes we are looking at in this study.

A larger, more complex problem that looms over any study of gender differences is the question of what it truly means to study a trends in terms of gender contrasts, and how much any study can truly accomplish. Analyzing a gender as a social group with its own linguistic variation is a difficult task. Men and women constitute a peculiar social group because in our society they tend to live in pairs, and never live in separate areas. While most social groups live together, have a distinctive subculture, and consider their social group a part of their identity, it's not clear to what extent men and women are aware of themselves as a group. As with any study, there are an infinite number of variables that could influence the results such as age, race, socioeconomic background, social setting,

etc. Though my study focuses on a particular group of people (20-30 year old, primarily Caucasian Americans) my hope is that the results indicate something larger about our culture and how social and linguistic behavior is learned and perpetuated. The discussion of the results is not meant to fully explain our behavior; the nature vs. nurture argument cannot be ignored, especially in the case of gender. Here we will account for certain gender differences in language in terms of social pressures, and though a biological account would be fascinating, we will not be able to explain why those social pressures exist and how they came to be.

In addition to these difficulties, we are faced with the problem of how to even define the idea of gender. It's important to clarify that we are discussing gender rather than sex, sex being the biological distinction while gender refers to socially constructed categories based on sex. Sex is essentially the same in any culture, in any background, while gender is wildly different from culture to culture. Though this study, and most discussion of gender differences in linguistics mainly focuses on the genders present in Western society, masculine and feminine, gender is not a clear binary the way sex is, and many other cultures have notions of a third, or fourth gender. To make generalizations about the way a gender group uses language, one must look at the unique social context around that particular gender group. For many writers on this topic, "the relation between linguistic form and social meaning is not a simple or straight-forward mapping; rather, linguistic forms index a variety of social meanings (disenfranchisement, formality, deference, powerlessness) which in turn constitute gender positions ( e.g., femininity)" (Lakoff, 2004).



Defining gender in its social context is an extremely difficult task; though members of a particular culture recognize gender norms and when they are broken, one would be hard pressed to describe exactly what constitutes a particular gender. What we consider gender is created by many different forces, from our biology to our sexual identity, to art, media, education, to our everyday interactions that inform us of others expectations. Gender is an inherently difficult subject to discuss because of its many influences and its fluid nature; what a culture considers normal for a particular gender is constantly changing and shifting, and our awareness of cultural expectations often influences the extent to which we adhere to them. The goal of this paper is to call attention to some of the gender expectations in our society that go unnoticed.

### 2.3 CULTURE AND THE CONSTRUCTED SELF

In a world where our notions of gender and sexual identity are constantly in flux, art and media offer a record of where our culture has been and where it is going. No one could claim certainly that art or media wholly influences society and creates the constructs that we live by, but it would be just as foolish to claim that art has no influence over the way we perceive ourselves. Art is an intrinsic part of culture, and has been for as long as science can look back. Art explodes culture, it builds on what is already present in society and draws our attention to aspects of our own lives that we then put back into the art world. In this way, social interactions as represented in literature and cinema can offer insight into the way we perceive ourselves, and how certain constructs are represented in the collective cultural consciousness.

In her study of dialog from the Bergman series *Scenes from a Marriage*, Deborah Tannen (1994) writes:

We would not claim that constructed dialog represents a reality lacking in transcripts, but rather that artificial dialog may represent an internalized model or schema for the production of conversation – a competence model that speakers have access to.

From this perspective, art, film and literature can be seen as a natural result of our internalized model. We can imagine that these models are created not only by real life interactions, but by our exposure to these types of manufactured dialogues.

In the following section, I present a study that examines a specific type of politeness, a kind of ‘reversed’ politeness where the speaker is intentionally rude or pokes fun at the hearer in order to show camaraderie or affection. This is an extremely common form of politeness that we’re exposed to at a very young age. Everyone knows that when the five year old boy pulls the five year old girls pigtails it’s because he ‘likes’ her, yet how often do we ask ourselves *why* he does this, or if this kind of behavior continues in different forms into adulthood. Men may not pull pigtails into their twenties, but it’s become a cliché that if a man and a woman are fighting at the start of a film, they’ll probably be in love by the end. This kind of behavior is extremely salient in art and media, ranging from the bickering lovers of Shakespeare and Marivaux, to the fast-talking couples of the 1930s, to the innumerable sitcom couples that habitually cut each other down in order to build romantic tension.

Using Facebook as a corpus, I explore to what extent these cultural representations are an accurate portrayal of real life discourse, whether are assumptions about the way people behave are founded in reality.

### 3. THE FACEBOOK STUDY

Susan Vance: You're angry, aren't you?

David Huxley: Yes, I am!

Susan Vance: Mm-hmm. The love impulse in men frequently reveals itself in terms of conflict.

~*Bringing Up Baby* (1938)

The purpose of this study is to discover whether gender influences one's likelihood to use a particular politeness technique, namely, the use of insulting or degrading humor directed at the hearer. I determine first, the frequency of overall joke making for each gender, followed by how often they use a 'negative' form of this technique, that is, how often a speaker makes an insulting joke directed at the hearer.

The primary source for this study was the social networking site [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com). I chose to use a social networking site as my corpus for several reasons. First, since my study focuses on gender, it would be very easy to determine whether both the speaker and hearer were male or female. Second, since the site is used primarily to keep in touch with friends and network, people posting on the site would be far more likely to be employing forms of politeness than on a site where strangers speak to each other or posting is anonymous. I looked only at users 'wall' posts, where it would be unlikely for one to find actual insults (as opposed to groups or fan pages where strangers might interact). Third, Facebook is a good source of politeness data because that's precisely what it is most often used for. It offers casual acquaintances, friends, or coworkers a low-pressure venue where they can offer up comments, ideas, links, jokes, etc for the approval of others, and give the same type of approval with extremely little effort. Lastly, Facebook offers us an interesting perspective on the presentation of culture because it is a form of social media

wherein its contributors consist of its audience. Facebook is both a direct result of the culture it exists in, and at the same time is constantly influencing that culture.

Before discussing the details of the data, it's important to state several caveats about the study. First, this is a very narrow study, and does not make any claims about men and women in the world at large, let alone even in the country at large. Due to the nature of Facebook, the data that I've compiled comes from 'friends' of 'friends,' which means that every speaker in the study is no more two steps removed from myself. Thus, the study focuses predominantly on white middle class Americans in their 20s and 30s. It would be interesting to pursue such factors as race or age in a later study, and there would no doubt be very interesting social factors to explore, but this particular study focuses only on the gender differences within this group.

### 3.1. METHOD

The data I collected came from the 'wall posts' of seven different men and six different women. These wall posts consisted of roughly 1,500 posts, or utterances, from 600 different speakers/posters. Figure 1 shows a typical Facebook wall with friends of the user posting comments to them. I isolated the posts from friends from the posts from the owner of the wall and starting with the most recent (the post at the top) categorized the posts by gender.

**Figure 1: Paris Hilton's Facebook Profile**



Every post from a friend, starting with the most recent was included in the study in order to preserve a baseline for general utterances. This means that when we discuss a percentage of insulting jokes, that we are comparing it to the **total number of posts** present, not just the posts that contain jokes. I did not include any posts that were responses to other posts, or contained in a discussion thread. Thus, I eliminated, to the best of my ability, and posts that were provoked. By using only unprovoked wall posts, we could eliminate, for the most part, the possibility that that a joke or insult was made in direct response to a previous joke made by the hearer. Additionally, I did not include any comments on photographs, videos, or links to outside material. I did include however,

posts from the speaker about the content of a photo of video they were posting on the hearers wall. For example, a photograph of a fat man in a dress with the post “this reminds me of you” would be included as an unprovoked, joking insult to the hearer. A response to that post however, would not be included because it would not be unprovoked.

The 1,500 posts were then marked for three criteria. If the post seemed earnest, and contained no jokes at all, it was left unmarked. If the post contained a positive joke (that is, a joke directed at the hearer in a flattering way), or a joke that was not related to the hearer in any way (a joke directed at a third party or unrelated topic) the post was marked simply as a ‘joke.’ If the post contained an joke that was insulting to the hearer, the post was marked ‘insulting joke.’<sup>1</sup> The following are examples of each type of joke:

- (2) Jokes:           a. **Good to see you, Prof. Awesome!** (positive, directed at hearer)  
                          c. **I just ran 100 miles in order to buy ice cream.** (neutral)

Insulting Joke: b. **It looks like you’ve got some food on your face. . . wait, is that supposed to be a beard?** (negative, directed at the hearer)

The data was then divided into categories by the gender of both the speaker and the hearer in order to determine not only which gender practiced this type of joke making more, but whether the gender of the hearer affected the types of jokes that were used.

### 3.2 RESULTS: NEGATIVE HUMOR AS A POLITENESS STRATEGY

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<sup>1</sup> My judgments on what constitutes positive and negative jokes were compared with a male native speaker of English who offered additional judgments on 300 (20%) of the examples. We agreed 87% of the time, and our Kappa score was .86.

The results of the study are shown in Tables 1 and 2, in terms of the raw number, as well as the percentage of the jokes and insults made in the 1,500 utterances. The data shows both the gender of the speaker and the hearer, thus dividing the results into four distinct categories: posts from men to men, from men to women, from women to women and from women to men. Each category consisted of about 300 posts, with the exception of the women to women, which consisted of 600 due to the low number of jokes made in that particular category. The sample size was increased in order to get a meaningful number of jokes for comparison. As we can see in Tables 1 and 2, the frequency of jokes from both genders was between 16%-21%, with the exception of the utterances between only women. Additionally, while both genders seem to use insults 10%-14% of the time, the women used insults with each other less than 2% of the time.

**Table 1: Jokes and Insulting Jokes by number of Occurrences**

| <b>Speaker</b> | <b>Hearer</b> | <b>Jokes</b> | <b>Insults</b> |
|----------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| Male           | Male          | 64/297       | 44/297         |
| Male           | Female        | 65/300       | 33/300         |
| Female         | Male          | 49/301       | 31/301         |
| Female         | Female        | 40/597       | 11/597         |

**Table 2: Jokes and Insulting Jokes by Percentages**

| Female         | Female        | 6%           | 1.8%           |
|----------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|
| <b>Speaker</b> | <b>Hearer</b> | <b>Jokes</b> | <b>Insults</b> |
| Male           | Male          | 21%          | 14%            |
| Male           | Female        | 21%          | 11%            |
| Female         | Male          | 16%          | 10%            |



We can draw several conclusions from the data. First, the women generally made less jokes than the men. This is evidenced both in the fact that they made slightly less jokes when speaking to men and significantly less when speaking to women. It also shows that when women speak to each other they are extremely unlikely to make negative jokes. Out of 600 utterances, they made only 11 negative jokes to each other while out of the 300 utterances between men they made 44, four times as many in half as many utterances. The men also seem to interact with the women similarly to the way they interact with each other, making just about the same amount of both jokes and negative jokes. The women however, do not behave the same way with the man as they do with each other. When posting on men's walls, the women tended to make almost as many insulting jokes as the men do with them. This would imply that men use this particular type of politeness to the same degree whether they are speaking to women or men, and don't change their behavior (at least in this respect) when interacting with women. Women on the other hand seem to be adjusting their behavior depending on the gender of the recipient.

The data was also analyzed in terms of each individual hearer, which can be seen in Figures 2 and 3.<sup>2</sup> In Figure 2 we can see that the amount of jokes made by the women increases when the hearers are men. When the hearers are women, the men's joke rate is significantly higher than the women's. As we can see from female hearer #4, the least number of jokes from male speakers to a female hearer is still higher than the highest

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<sup>2</sup> The blue bars represent male speakers while the red represents female speakers. The hearers (F and M) that contain only a single color bar represent individual hearers for whom there was only one speaker gender represented in the data. This was necessary as the study required a much higher number of female speakers.

number of jokes from women to other women. However, when the hearers are male, the number of jokes made by each gender overlaps quite a bit.

**Figure 2: Jokes by Gender**

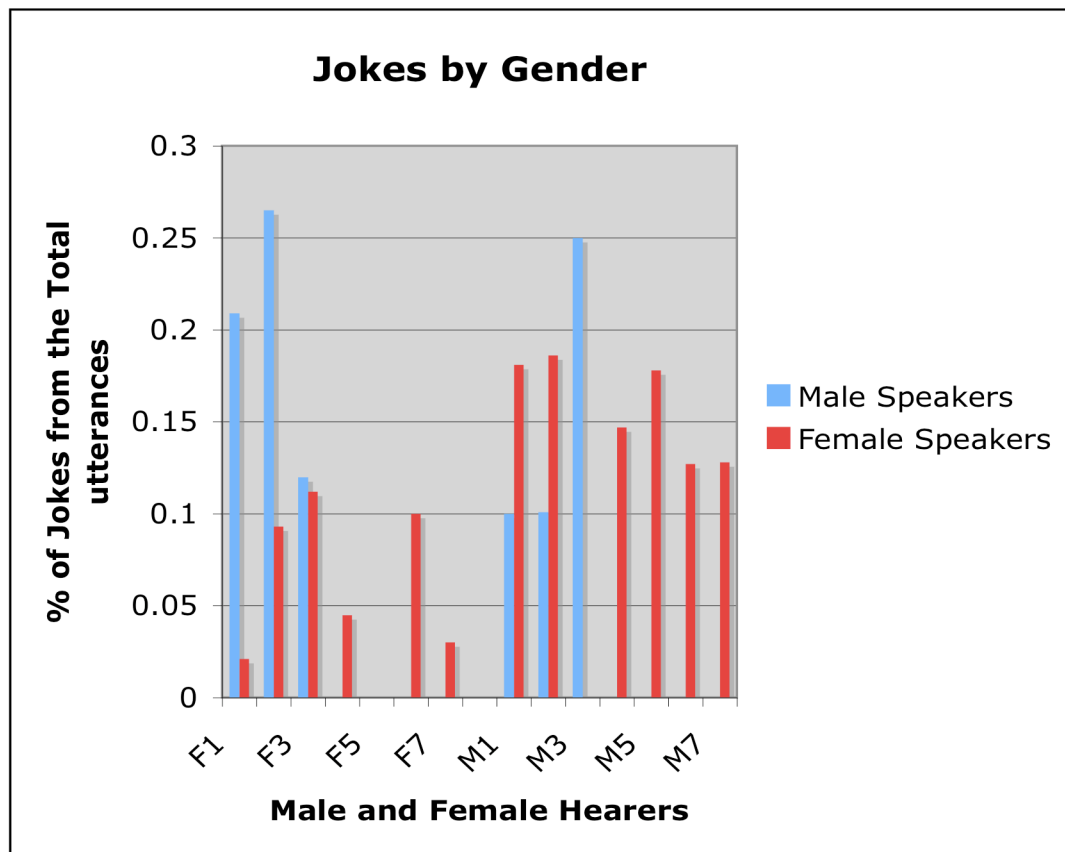
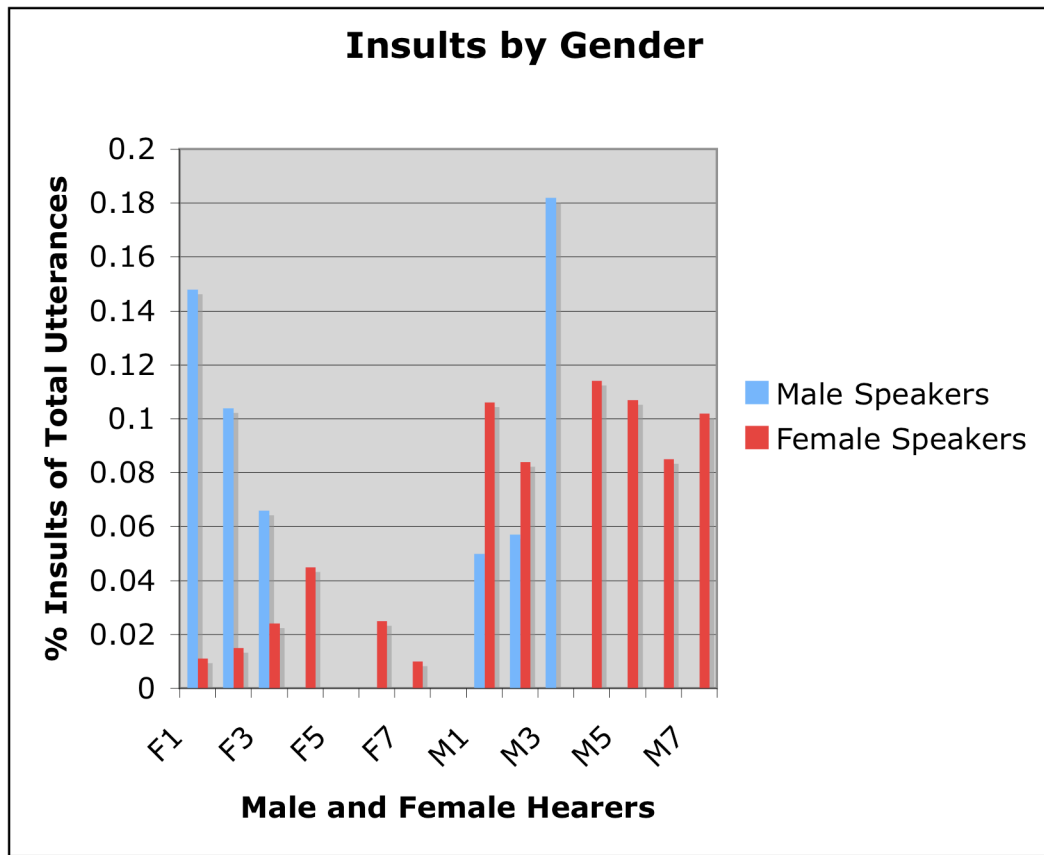


Figure 3 shows the same breakdown for the insulting jokes. As with the positive jokes, the number of insulting jokes between females is extremely low. There is no single female hearer that receives more insults from women than any other female hearer receives from men. Again, as with the positive joke data, the number of negative jokes increases when the recipients are men, and we see several male hearers who receive even more insults from women than from men, showing that women change their behavior drastically depending on the gender of the hearer.

Figure 3: Insults by Gender



### 3.4 SEXUALITY AND GENDER

In addition to the data in sections 3.2 and 3.3, some attention was paid to the actual content of the posts in question. Specifically, posts or nicknames containing references to sexuality (as well as homosexuality) were also tabulated by gender. Table 3 shows the number of sexual and homosexual jokes made in the 1,500 posts that made up the corpus.

**Table 3: Sexual and Homosexual Comments**

|       | <b>Sexual</b> | <b>Homosexual</b> |
|-------|---------------|-------------------|
| M → M | 27/297        | 19/297            |
| F → F | 12/597        | 2/597             |
| M → F | 5/300         | X                 |
| F → M | 3/301         | X                 |

We can see here that the men were far more likely to make both sexual and homosexual jokes to each other than the women were, while both sexes appear to be fairly reserved when speaking to the opposite sex. The most interesting factor though, is the extent to which the men use homosexual humor in their interactions, especially compared to the women. Sexuality, seems to play a large role in how men communicate with each other while it tends to be avoided in discourse between men and women.

### 3. 5 SUMMARY

The data brings up several questions and discussion points. Why are men are more likely not only to make jokes, but to make negative jokes? Why do women change their behavior based on gender when men do not? Why do women make more negative jokes with men than with each other? How does sexuality affect male and female discourse, and how do sexual jokes come into play with politeness strategies? In the following section, I will attempt to shed some light onto these issues using ideas from the literature on politeness, as well as several perspectives on gender and communication.

## **4. THEORIES ON GENDER AND COMMUNICATION**

### **4.1 FORM VERSUS FUNCTION**

It is the very nature of language that there are not only infinite ways of expressing one's self, but also of interpreting that expression. Not only do we exercise many different ways of expressing linguistic politeness, but it is often the case that the same linguistic form can express a variety of different meanings depending on the context. There is nothing intrinsically 'polite' about a given utterance; rather, the speaker and hearer interpret something as being polite or not given their cultural and linguistic experience. There are endless cultural distinctions and divisions, across continents, across age groups, that teach us to change our way of behaving in order to maintain decorum. People tend to be more aware of some of the ways that they alter their behavior than they are of others. While anyone can tell you they dress differently for work than they do for a date, people might not be able to describe how their speech patterns change when they're in the office versus at the bar. Many people might be surprised to hear that men and women speak differently, at least to the extent that they do; however gender creates a social group just like any other with dress codes, codes of conduct and of course, language practices. Given that language choices and interpretations are often influenced by gender, we might be able to generalize certain language strategies and their effect on the hearer in terms of the gender of the participants.

## 4.2 SOLIDARITY THROUGH DOMINANCE

Narrator: Well, what do you want me to do? You just want me to hit you?

Tyler Durden: C'mon, do me this one favor.

~*Fight Club* (1999)

Power and dominance are issues that are brought up time and again when discussing gender and linguistic behavior. Numerous authors have noted how the display of power plays a role in male interaction, starting from a very young age. In a study from Tannen, she discovers that “all the conversations between young boys (and none of the young girls) had numerous examples of teasing and mock attack.” She was “amazed to discover that a fight could initiate rather than preclude a friendship (Tannen, 1993).” The use of power as a politeness strategy is what Tannen calls the ‘polysemy of power and solidarity.’ Though a display of power may appear to be an attempt to dominate, the intention behind the action may be to establish solidarity with the hearer. In this way, a particular linguistic device such as teasing can communicate two things that are seemingly in opposition. Tannen argues however that power and solidarity are entailed within each other:

“Any show of solidarity necessarily entails power, in that the requirements of similarity limits freedom and independence. At the same time, any show of power entails solidarity by involving participants in relation to each other. This creates a closeness that can be contrasted with the distance of individuals who have no relation to each other at all. (Tannen 1993)

It should come as no surprise then, that joke making, insulting jokes and rude nicknames are a common form of bonding and politeness amongst males. As we saw in the Facebook study, 14% of every interaction between men was a negative joke of some sort. When someone makes a negative joke, they are both maintaining their status and power

through opposition and teasing, as well as creating solidarity through the use of a joke. Usually, an insult or criticism would be seen as a face-threatening act, but under the guise of a joke, it actually addresses the hearer's positive face by establishing a shared background and in-group dynamic. By presupposing common ground, the insult becomes a gesture of politeness and friendship. Why then, would a person choose to use this complex form of politeness rather than simply complimenting the hearer?

Holms (1995) notes that compliments, especially based on appearance, are extremely rare between American males. She hypothesizes that men are more likely to perceive compliments as threatening to their negative face. A compliment in the wrong context, or spoken by the wrong person can easily be interpreted as threatening. Men might feel embarrassed by unsolicited tokens of solidarity, especially if growing up, they were taught to show solidarity through opposition and power plays. Once a power rapport is established, a compliment from a male could be seen as deviant, and breaks the common ground between the speaker and hearer. If you enter into a discourse expecting a fight for power and are met not with opposition but by someone actually yielding power to you, it calls the masculine standard of behavior into question. Once people learn that establishing power and dominance along with solidarity is the masculine way, they are unlikely to deviate away from it for fear of losing their male status.

The data in the Facebook study shows very clearly that antagonism and opposition are prevalent in all of the discourse with male participants; the only interactions that lacked insults as a way of bonding were the posts from women to other women.

#### 4.3 HOMOSEXUAL IRONY

David: You know how I know that you're gay?

Cal: How? Cuz you're gay? And you can tell who other gay people are?

~*The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005)

Holms also reports that “a number of men have commented that at least one of the reasons of the scarcity of appearance compliments between men is fear of the possible imputation of homosexuality (Holms, 1995).” It is an unfortunate truth that many men in America are raised to believe that homosexuality inherently denies maleness, and that having tendencies that may be considered more feminine indicate something about one’s sexual identity. While young and adolescent women may have to deal with being called a ‘tomboy’ or ‘unladylike,’ which attacks her gender identity, it is far more rare for a women to have her sexual identity called into question (perhaps because a women’s sexual identity is rarely talked about in the first place). It’s not unusual for young women to hold hands, do each other’s hair and share clothes, but for many young men, this is simply not an option; to engage in that kind of behavior would be met with ridicule, and in some cases, physical abuse.

This could explain then, why the data shows so many jokes of a homosexual nature between men but practically none amongst the women. Approaching the subject of homosexuality through joking accusations, directed both at the speaker and the hearer creates a space where men can compliment each other physically and emotionally while using the humor and irony to assert their heterosexuality. For a lot of men in America, the practice of homosexual joke making is a learned defense against the very real threat of physical violence.



#### 4.4 PRESERVING FEMININITY

We discussed earlier that one of the reasons that men make jokes is to maintain power and status while still being polite. Since the data revealed that women don't make many jokes, and hardly any negative jokes, it would follow then that they would be less concerned with status and power. In fact, this idea has been written about many times before, and there are numerous studies exploring whether women are more likely to use forms of politeness that lower their own status or raise the other persons. Stubbe (1991) presents a study of modified disagreements versus bald disagreements, where the women were found to modify or qualify their disagreeing responses, whereas the men were not afraid to overtly contradict others. Holms (1995) discusses several studies that show that women tend to use pragmatic particles like *you know*, *I think* and *sort of* to express positive politeness far more than men do. Part of the reason for this seems to be that pragmatic particles and hedges tend to make the speaker appear lower status. Holms writes:

Women are more concerned with making connections; they seek involvement and focus on the interdependencies between people. Men are more concerned with autonomy and detachment; they seek independence and focus on hierarchical relationships. If one accepts this view, it is possible to see how such psychological differences might account for differences in the ways women and men use language. A preference for autonomy links more obviously with linguistics strategies that assert control, for example, while a focus on connection relates more obviously to linguistics devices that involve others and emphasize the interpersonal nature of talk. (Holms, 1995)

The same way that masculinity is associated with power and dominance, femininity is associated with submissiveness; in order to preserve one's feminine impression, one must

avoid language practices that assert dominance and power. Joking creates a status relationship that women are not expected to emulate. In American culture, humor is not associated with femininity, perhaps because of the inherent power dynamic, or perhaps because of the cultural history of humor and its lack of female participants. Whatever the reason, women learn that humor is not an important part of their identity as women.

It could be the case as well, that one of the reasons women are less interested in making jokes is because they don't *need* to. Between women, there's no danger of a compliment being face threatening, and there's no need to avoid direct politeness by diluting it with a joke. Positive comments about looks, personality, even sexuality are all allowed in the feminine discourse without fear of being labeled as a homosexual, or having their gender called into question. It should come as no surprise then, that there were virtually no homosexual comments between the women present in the study. If there's no danger of being labeled homosexual, there's no incentive to include homosexuality in the humor discourse.

#### 4.5 SAVING FACE

Cher: I want to do something for humanity.  
Josh: How about sterilization?  
~ *Clueless* (1995)

While women may be able to communicate with each other openly without fear of ignoring the hearer's face needs, the situation becomes more complicated when we look at cross-sex interactions. The power dynamic between men and women (men default to raising their status while women default to lowering) creates a context where

compliments are more likely to be threatening. In, for example, an office setting, a compliment like *You look really sexy today* would be acceptable coming from one woman to another, but from a man it constitutes sexual harassment. Even something as simple as *You look nice today* could be misconstrued; if a woman expects a man to be vying for power and dominance in conversation, a compliment would be interpreted as having some sort of ulterior motive. Coates (1986) notes that even when receiving compliments from women, men tend to be uneasy, perhaps because of their expectations when dealing with other men. She presents the following example of an instance where a man deflects a compliment with a somewhat jabbing joke:

(41) [in a pub]

*Woman:* the thing I really like about you and the thing that makes our relationship into a special kind of friendship above all else is that you're always prepared to listen.

*Man:* pardon? (sarcastic)

Coates research indicates that 'people accept the majority of compliments they receive from someone of the same sex, but reject about 50% of compliments offered by members of the opposite sex (Coates 1986).' The example she cites shows the speaker ignoring the negative face-needs of the addressee, which of course puts him on the defensive; he makes a joke in order to raise his status and claim dominance in the conversation. This kind of back and forth joking between men and women is fairly common, and shows up quite a bit in the Facebook data. Joking is a useful alternative to direct compliments or flattery in a cross-sex situation because it allows the speaker to form a bond and make a connection with the hearer without too much risk of an inappropriate interpretation. In the example above, the man both deflects and acknowledges the statement with a joke. He establishes common ground by making a joke that shows he actually listened to what she

said. This explains, to an extent, the lack of sexual remarks between men and women that we saw in the Facebook study, but the prevalence of jokes between both genders. Sexual comments, even within the confines of a joke, provide the opportunity for drastic misinterpretation.

#### 4.6 ADAPTATION

Walter Burns: There's been a lamp burning in the window for ya, honey. . .  
Hildy Johnson: Oh, I jumped out that window a long time ago.  
~*His Girl Friday* (1940)

So far we've explored some reasons why men are driven to use humor in conversation, and why women are less likely to use it. However, there is one aspect of the data that doesn't seem to match up with the social motivations we've discussed. If women are not expected to make jokes and they are less concerned with being in a position of power in the conversation, why then do we find them making just as many jokes as the men in cross-gender discourse? If the more feminine behavior is to lower one's own status, then women should want to avoid negative and insulting humor as it raises their status and lowers the hearers. The cross-sex data seems to be in direct opposition to the same-sex data in that the women are utilizing an extremely masculine device in their interactions with men. Shouldn't women be more concerned with preserving femininity around men than around each other?

Popular culture would have us believe otherwise. In fact, bickering, teasing and joking have been a staple in representations of male/female relationships for some time. In an analysis of one of the staples of the fast-talk romance genre, *It Happened One Night*,

Mizejewski discusses the all-American bickering couple in terms of dominance and solidarity. She defines the fast-talking genre in the following way:

One Theory of film genres sees them as “social ‘rituals’ with the community goal of validating our cultural practices (i.e. heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy) and resolving their contradictions (individualism, the randomness of desire). Understood this way, romantic comedy celebrates both the American-style rugged individual but also marriage – with all its compromises – as the place for the stubborn individualist. (Mizejewski, 2010)

For men and women, it may be the case that insults, negative jokes and dominance games offer a way of dealing with the inherent contradictory nature of power based relationships. The polysemous nature of power (that it necessarily entails solidarity and vice versa) requires one to claim independence and individualism as a part of the bonding process. In order for a woman to be considered a partner or pal to a man, she must claim status for herself.

So what drives her to emulate male language practices in order to accomplish this? An explanation reveals itself if we are willing to discuss femininity in terms of being the minority gender group in America. Women make up an unusual social group in that they generally don't live in separate areas, in fact, people commonly live in male/female pairs. Additionally, while many in-groups tend to come in conflict with an out-group, men and women tend to get along well. However, women have grown more aware of themselves as a group, and while gender constitutes a peculiar group, it still has its own recognizable sub-culture, meeting places and traditions.

Any minority group that is aware of its status is faced with the decision to either accept or reject their inferior position. If they reject it, one of the first steps to gaining equality is to adopt the values and rituals of the majority group in order to show that they are worthy of similar recognition and status. In order to not be seen as inferior, a group must redefine their characteristics in positive terms instead of the negative terms that have been defined by society. However, they cannot do this until equality has been achieved through adaptation.

Examples of linguistic assimilation are extremely common in gender studies, and there is a lot of evidence that women are generally more inclined to adapt in linguistic situations than men are. Coates notes that women have assimilated in professional situations through linguistic means such as using deeper voices, using swear words, adopting more assertive styles, and speaking about traditionally male topics. Coates also presents several studies from Trudgill and Labov that show that women are more sensitive to the use of new speech variants, and used a higher proportion of prestige forms than male speakers.

Masculine or androgynous behavior offers more rewards for women than for men as it allows them “a wide repertoire of behavior to cope with the wide variety of social roles they have to take on (Coates, 1986).”

Of course it should be no surprise that women have adopted male patterns of speaking since so much has changed culturally in much the same way. Women starting getting the same jobs as men, wearing the same clothes, fighting in the same wars, why shouldn't

they start speaking the same way too? Women have even achieved status and power by taking control over other women:

Writers like Levy (2005) have suggested that another way in which some women have achieved a kind of power over others is by becoming what she calls *female chauvinist pigs*. Levy suggests that a number of practices which could be described as demeaning or compromising women in various ways: going to strip clubs which feature female performers, wearing clothes with the Playboy logo, being interested in porn, working for men's magazines like *Maxim*, having breast implants, taking pole dancing lessons, getting Brazilian waxes, 'being like a man' etc., have started to become popular with some women, who view them as sexy, fun, liberating and rebellious. Levy argues that such women are becoming complicit exploiters of other women and themselves. By showing approval of the dominant male hegemonic structure, they are awarded some power. However, this power comes at the expense of other women. (Baker 2008)

While it is clear that women have learned to adapt, the question remains to what extent these factors are responsible for the data in the Facebook study. So far we've interpreted the amount of joke making that women use as an attempt to assimilate to the male way of speaking, but a need to appear feminine must also play a role in the lack of joke making between women. Perhaps it's not that a woman's default behavior is to be sincere and straightforward, but rather than she tries harder to appear more feminine and low status when speaking with other females. After all, status and power is important, but so is inclusion in your own social group. Woman may be driven to make jokes, but change their behavior in order to identify with other women and appear feminine.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Shall quips, and sentences, and these paper bullets of the brain, awe a  
man from the career of his humour? No; the world must be peopled.  
~ Benedict, *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600)

The personal nature of the study leaves many issues open ended. Because all of the utterances were between individuals with unique relationships, we are left to wonder how much of a person's decision to make a joke or an insult are based on gender constructs and how much is influenced by the nature of their relationship with the hearer. Moreover, we are left to wonder how much an individual influences a person's linguistic behavior both on and off the Internet. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter offer us the chance to explore exactly this aspect of social interactions. One could easily design a study that tracked changes in linguistic behavior based on the relationship of the speaker to the hearer. Though this particular study used more than 600 speakers, an enlightening addition to this paper would be a study that focused on only a few different speakers and how their frequency of joke making changed depending the gender of the hearer. Because Facebook keeps a chronological record of interactions, one could even measure the occurrences of jokes and insults between couples in the weeks leading up to their relationship compared to once they are already dating.

Of course, because we are dealing with the Internet and not the 'real world,' much of what we observe has to be taken with a grain of salt. Facebook is a different discourse setting with different factors that influence people's linguistic choices. While we can't say definitively that the same social factors are responsible for behavior we see in everyday discourse, on television and on the Internet, I hope that this study has shown at



least that there are social and cultural influences at play, and that these types of media can give us an insight into ‘real world’ behavior.

Lastly, it is my intention with this study to bring to light aspects of our daily interactions that we perhaps take for granted. I make no claims about the utility of these various methods of politeness, or whether our behavior should be modified, rather, I hope that this discussion will encourage us to be more aware of the elements in our lives, in media, in our culture, that have influenced the way we view ourselves and interact with the rest of the world.

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## VITA

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